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'They're Killing People': Biden Denounces Social Media for Virus Disinformation

The president's blunt statement capped weeks of frustration in the White House over the spread of vaccine disinformation on Facebook and other platforms.



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WASHINGTON — President Biden unleashed his growing frustration with social media on Friday, saying that platforms like Facebook were “killing people” by allowing disinformation about the coronavirus vaccine to spread online.

Mr. Biden's forceful statement capped weeks of anger in the White House over the dissemination of vaccine disinformation online, even as the pace of inoculations slows and health officials warn of the rising danger of the Delta variant.

Just before boarding Marine One for a weekend in Camp David in Maryland, Mr. Biden was asked what his message was to social media platforms when it came to Covid-19 disinformation.

“They’re killing people,” he said. “Look, the only pandemic we have is among the unvaccinated, and that — and they’re killing people.”

Mr. Biden's comments signaled a more aggressive approach to vaccine hesitancy after weeks of coaxing Americans to get vaccinated and dispatching officials and volunteers door to door to encourage people to get shots. He spoke a day after the surgeon general of the United States used his first formal advisory to criticize tech and social media companies to stop dangerous health information that presents “an urgent threat to public health.”

The Biden administration has warned of the spread of misinformation about vaccines and the coronavirus from a range of sources, including politicians and news outlets. But this week, White House officials went further and singled out social media companies for allowing false information to proliferate. That came after weeks of failed attempts to get Facebook to turn over information detailing what mechanisms were in place to combat misinformation about the vaccine, according to a person familiar with the matter.

“Our point is that there is information that is leading to people not taking the vaccine, and people are dying as a result,” Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, said before Mr. Biden made his comments. “And we have responsibility as a public health matter to raise that issue.”

The spread of false information has become the latest flash point for social media companies. Facebook and other social media sites have struggled with their role as platforms for speech while protecting their users from disinformation campaigns, like Russian efforts to influence presidential elections or false statements about the pandemic.

Facebook rebuffed the president's assertion.

“We will not be distracted by accusations which aren't supported by the facts,” said Dani Lever, a company spokeswoman. She pointed to efforts to promote authoritative information about Covid-19 and vaccines that two billion people on the platform have viewed.

Conservative figures in the news media and political leaders have balked at the calls by Democrats to clamp down on people who spread false information, calling the actions censorship and politically biased.

A day before Mr. Biden's statement, Ms. Psaki said the Biden administration had been flagging “problematic posts for Facebook that spread disinformation,” prompting questions over how the White House was balancing the First Amendment rights of those online with messaging that undermines public health.

Ms. Psaki said the administration recommended to platforms that they form an enforcement strategy against those promoting false statements about the pandemic, adding that 12 people producing 65 percent of antivaccine misinformation on social media remained active on Facebook. Ms. Psaki seemed to be referring to a statistic from the Center for Countering Digital Hate, a nonprofit that aims to combat disinformation.

“You shouldn't be banned from one platform and not others,” Ms. Psaki said.

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Responding to questions on Friday about potential overreach by the federal government in encouraging Facebook to take down the posts, Ms. Psaki said it was a matter of public health.



Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, and Dr. Vivek Murthy, the surgeon general, at a news conference on Thursday. Dr. Murthy and other senior administration officials have been in talks with Facebook about curtailing misinformation on the platform. Shawn Thew/EPA, via Shutterstock

"We raised for them in our direct channels, of which every administration has always had with every social media platform, that we're seeing this trend," she said. "It's troubling. That information is inaccurate."

Since January, senior White House officials, including the surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, have been in talks with the social media company to stop the spread of false stories about vaccination side effects and other harms.

Despite repeated requests by the White House, Facebook has not shared even basic data on how much vaccine misinformation exists and if the company's efforts to stop its spread are working, according to the person familiar with the talks. When administration officials presented data from CrowdTangle, a content tracking tool owned by Facebook, that showed vaccine misinformation was soaring, company officials dismissed its accuracy.

In another meeting with Dr. Murthy, officials at Facebook noted that it had tried to get "influencers" with big audiences to promote vaccination, as an apparent push against misinformation, the person familiar with the meetings said. Dr. Murthy angrily said that while the company promoted its efforts to encourage vaccination, it did not do enough to defend against bad information.

In one tense meeting in the late spring, according to the person familiar with the matter, a Facebook official responded defensively, "How do you know if your efforts are working?"

Mr. Biden's comments on Friday came as fewer than 50 percent of Americans are fully vaccinated, and many top health experts have called for the president to do more to reach people who have yet to get shots.

While hospitalizations remain low relative to the peaks of the pandemic, local hot spots are emerging as public health officials warn of the spread of the Delta variant. Republican leaders, some of whom have spread disinformation about the vaccine, have begun speaking out more forcefully in favor of getting shots as the virus spreads through conservative communities. The vaccines are effective against the Delta variant.

The White House has sought to push a campaign-like grass-roots effort to encourage Americans to get their shots, enlisting volunteers to go door to door to provide accurate information about vaccines.

Administration officials have been particularly concerned about hesitancy rates among young adults, even recruiting the 18-year-old pop star Olivia Rodrigo to the White House this week to encourage vaccinations.

The White House has also dispatched top officials around the country to promote the vaccine, with some officials even making the case on social media.